Distinguishing Phenomena and What Is Meaningful

*Dharmārthavibhaṅga*
The Noble Great Vehicle Sūtra “Distinguishing Phenomena and What Is Meaningful”

Āryadharmārtha vibhaṅga nāma mahāyānasūtra
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SUMMARY

s. 1 There are two main themes in *Distinguishing Phenomena and What Is Meaningful*. One is in the narrative structure: Buddha Śākyamuni tells how, countless eons ago, in a world called Flower Origin, a buddha named Arisen from Flowers gave instructions to a royal family, and prophesied the awakening of the prince Ratnākara. Arisen from Flowers, Buddha Śākyamuni then relates, has since become the buddha Amitābha, and the prince Ratnākara the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara. The other theme is doctrinal, and lies in the content of the teaching given by Arisen from Flowers: it explains the four mistakes made by ordinary beings in the way they perceive the five aggregates, and how bodhisattvas teach them how to clear away these misconceptions, so that they may be free of the sufferings that result.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

ac. 1 Translated by the Dharmachakra Translation Committee under the guidance of Chökyi Nyima Rinpoche. The translation was produced by Anna Zilman and Timothy Hinkle. Andreas Doctor compared the translation with the Tibetan and edited the text.
i. Introduction

i.1 Distinguishing Phenomena and What Is Meaningful is a scripture that in the Degé Kangyur belongs to the General Sūtra section. The sūtra is set in Anāthapiṇḍada’s park at Śrāvastī, where Buddha Śākyamuni is residing with a gathering of monks and bodhisattvas. In delivering his teaching, Śākyamuni describes an ancient world known as Flower Origin, in which lived a buddha called Arisen from Flowers. That world was governed by a king known as Attainment of Victory, under whose rule everyone practiced the Great Vehicle. Prompted by the prince Ratnākara, the royal family goes to meet Arisen from Flowers. That buddha then teaches the audience about the insubstantial and unsatisfactory nature of the aggregates, and describes beings’ tendency to perceive the aggregates in a flawed manner: while the aggregates are actually impermanent, repulsive, unclean, and unreal, sentient beings conceive of them as lasting, beautiful, pure, and true. Buddha Śākyamuni further explains how beings are themselves a product of their actions, and that the five aggregates (the components that together constitute a sentient being) are not purposely created by anyone.

i.2 The sūtra thus presents a version of the well-known “four errors” (catvāro viparyāsāḥ, phyin ci log pa bzhi), often described in Buddhist canonical literature as the main underpinnings of sentient beings’ mistaken view of the world: erroneously perceiving (1) the impermanent to be permanent, (2) the painful to be pleasant, (3) the dirty to be clean, and (4) what has no self to have a self. The four errors are discussed extensively not only in the Abhidharma, but also in the Catuḥśataka of Āryadeva (fl. third century), where each is treated in a separate chapter (chapters 6–9). The present sūtra invokes the four errors, but instead of presenting the illusion that the painful is pleasant, it speaks of the illusion that the repulsive (mi sdug pa) is beautiful (sdug pa). Aside from this minor twist, the context remains that of the usual four errors.

i.3 Once the Buddha Arisen from Flowers has taught the audience, the king, queen, prince, and the entire retinue all take ordination. The thus-gone one then prophesies Prince Ratnākara’s awakening, revealing his future name, world,
lifespan, and the nature of his teachings. Toward the end of the sūtra, Buddha Śākyamuni reveals the current identity of the main characters of his narrative. Arisen from Flowers has now become the buddha Amitābha, and Ratnākara has become the bodhisattva known as Avalokiteśvara. In the remainder of the sūtra, Śākyamuni reveals that anyone who faithfully receives this Dharma teaching will be reborn in Sukhāvatī (the buddha realm of Amitābha) and that all women who touch or read this sūtra will be able to exchange their female bodies for male forms and never again take rebirth in a female body.5

The title of the sūtra could be interpreted in a number of different ways, some of which would require translations other than the one we have chosen. Chos (dharma) could refer to qualities, factors, practices, states, phenomena, or the teachings, while don (artha), too, has a wide range of meanings including object, referent, goal, purpose, worth, use, meaning, and cause. We have inevitably had to narrow the possibilities down to produce a rendering in English.6

There is no extant Sanskrit version of this scripture, and the sūtra does not appear to have been translated into Chinese. In producing this translation, we have based our work on the Degé xylograph Kangyur while consulting the Comparative Edition (dpe bsdur ma), as well as the Stok Palace manuscript Kangyur. The colophon of the sūtra states that it was translated by the Indian scholars Jinamitra and Dānaśīla, as well as the prolific Tibetan translator Yeshé Dé. We can therefore date the Tibetan translation to the late eighth or early ninth century, and this is confirmed by the text’s inclusion in the early ninth century Denkarma (ldan dkar ma) and Phangthangma (’phang thang ma) catalogues.7
[F.42.b] Homage to all buddhas and bodhisattvas!

1.2 Thus did I hear at one time. The Blessed One was staying in the Jeta Grove, Anāthapiṇḍada’s park in Śrāvastī. He was there together with a great saṅgha of monks, as well as a great saṅgha of bodhisattvas.

1.3 At that time, the Blessed One recounted the following to the bodhisattva great being [F.43.a] Delighted by Victory:

1.4 “Noble son, at a past time countless, limitless, immeasurably many eons ago, there was a world called Flower Origin. It was abundantly prosperous and happy, had good crops, and was delightful. It was filled with many people, and was as even as the palm of a hand. Noble son, in the world Flower Origin dwelled the thus-gone, worthy, perfect buddha Arisen from Flowers. He still abides there, alive and well, teaching the Dharma to the fourfold assembly, as well as to gods, nāgas, yakṣas, gandharvas, demigods, garuḍas, kiṃnaras, mahoragas, humans, and non-humans.

1.5 “Noble son, in the world Flower Origin lived the ruler Attainment of Victory. He was a universal emperor, who had as his dominion the entire trichiliocosm. Noble son, under the king’s rule beings had found happiness and well-being, followed the path of the ten virtuous deeds, and were satisfied with their spouses. Everyone there had entered but a single vehicle: they had entered the Great Vehicle. They had entered the supreme vehicle. They had entered the main vehicle. They had entered the true vehicle. They had entered the foremost vehicle—the best, the finest, and the highest vehicle. The vehicle they had
entered was higher than the highest: the unsurpassed vehicle. They had entered the unequalled vehicle. They had entered the matchless vehicle. They had entered the inconceivable vehicle. They had entered the unfathomable vehicle. Noble son, under the rule of that king Attainment of Victory, vehicles other than the Great Vehicle were unheard of.

“Noble son, in his retinue of queens King Attainment of Victory had ninety-nine thousand wives, none of whom had entered any other vehicle. They all belonged solely to the Great Vehicle, longed for the Dharma day and night, and took delight in the Dharma. Noble son, that king’s primary wife Ratnaśrī, who was a beloved bodhisattva, followed the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Saṅgha. She belonged to the Great Vehicle, longed for the Dharma at all times, and found delight only in the joy of the Dharma.

“The queen Ratnaśrī answered the young child:

‘My only son, the omniscient one,
The protector of the world,
The unsurpassed one who delights all—
He is alive in the world of gods and humans.’

“The prince Ratanākara then said to his parents, ‘Father and Mother, come here! We must go to the thus-gone, worthy, perfect buddha Arisen from Flowers in order to behold him, to pay homage and make offerings, to serve him, and to receive Dharma teachings from him. If you wonder why we need to do so, Father and Mother, it is because the Thus-Gone One performs hardships in the world of gods and humans.

‘He is a protector liberating those who have not been liberated.
He grants eyesight to the blind.
He is heroic and courageous with regard to the Dharma. [F.44.a]
He is as unwavering as a great mountain.’

“King Attainment of Victory and Queen Ratnaśrī then brought their son and the retinue of queens and servants and went before that blessed one. They circumambulated that blessed one seven times and offered him extremely valuable pearl necklaces, after which they all sat down among the assembly. Noble son, the prince then rose up into the sky to the height of seven palm trees
by means of his miraculous ability, and showered upon the blessed Arisen from Flowers a rain of jewels, flowers, and incense. He then proclaimed to that blessed one:

1.12 “‘O Teacher, you have crossed
The great river of suffering,
And ferry beings across it.
I have come here to see you, Omniscient One.

1.13 “‘As the unsurpassed protector of the world,
There is no one who has ever matched you,
Or displayed such qualities as yours,
In the world of gods and humans.

1.14 “‘You establish in the Lesser Vehicle
Beings who have strayed onto negative paths,
Those who are under the sway of desire and anger,
And then you teach the Great Vehicle.

1.15 “‘You are skilled in means and courageous,
A master of great compassion.
The Dharma is meaningful and you are sated by the Dharma;
You set forth the Dharma and are a source of all qualities.

1.16 “‘Also, knowing phenomena to be unborn
And without substance,
You know their true nature.
That is how you perform hardships.’

1.17 “The young prince praised that blessed one in this manner, then circumambulated him and sat before him.

1.18 “The Blessed One looked in all directions with his broad eyes, which resembled the petals of a lotus flower. Knowing the minds and mental states of the fourfold assembly, he said to King Attainment of Victory:

1.19 “‘Great King, although the five aggregates are insubstantial, childish ordinary beings think of them as being substantial. [F.44.b] Great King, the aggregates look awful; they smell terrible; they ooze pus and blood; they are like wood, clods of dirt, or roads; and they are insubstantial, inert, and interlinked with joy and sorrow. They are linked to each other by chains of craving, are full of affliction, and are vile. Still, ordinary beings think that such insubstantial things are substantial; they think that impermanent things are permanent, repulsive things are beautiful, unclean things are clean, and unreal things are real. Great King, the five aggregates are “painted” by one’s own karma. As an analogy, O Great King, there is no painter who paints the peacock’s five-colored tail, and
neither is there any paint involved. Rather, it is painted by the peacock’s own karma. Great King, in the same way, childish ordinary beings arise from reciprocal conditions, painted by their own karma.’

“At this point the bodhisattva great being Invincible Lord stood up among the assembly, circumambulated the Blessed One, draped his shawl over one shoulder, knelt down on his right knee, and bowed with joined palms.

“He said to the Blessed One, ‘Blessed One, these aggregates do look awful and smell terrible; they ooze blood and pus; they are like wood, clods of dirt, walls, or roads; they are insubstantial and inert. Childish ordinary beings think that these things have substance, but these beings are like the mistaken, the blind, and the confused. They have fallen into bewilderment. They are completely enveloped in darkness, obscurity, and veils. They are lost in the dense thicket of all their wrong views. Blessed One, these four collections of the Dharma are all profound; they are like space. [F.45.a] Blessed One, will any beings ever come to understand correctly the statements that are spoken in discourses such as this?’

“The blessed Arisen from Flowers answered that bodhisattva great being, ‘Noble son, whenever bodhisattva great beings manifest, it will be in order to purify beings. They teach them the Dharma in accordance with their inclinations. They cut through the cravings of those who are tormented by craving. They clear away the suffering of those tormented by pain. Knowing all phenomena to be insubstantial and knowing them to be like space, they direct sentient beings to the nature of phenomena. Bodhisattvas are then known as purifiers of beings.’

“When that blessed, thus-gone, worthy, perfect buddha Arisen from Flowers had delivered this teaching concerning sentient beings, King Attainment of Victory cut off his hair and beard. His son, as well as Queen Ratnaśrī and the retinue of queens and servants, likewise all cut off their hair and they all took ordination with the Blessed One.

“The Blessed One now spoke to the assembly: ‘Noble children, look at the young prince. Noble children, this sublime being has produced roots of virtue in the company of ninety-nine trillion buddhas. On all of these occasions he has become a Dharma preacher. And this person here has always been the father of that sublime being. This sublime being has always ripened beings to unsurpassed and perfect awakening. Noble children, as soon as I pass into parinirvāṇa, the young prince Ratnākara will become a buddha. He will be seated in front of the tree of awakening, which will be bedecked with various precious stones. When he attains awakening, he will become a thus-gone, worthy, perfect buddha. [F.45.b] He will be someone learned and virtuous, a blissful one, a knower of the world, a charioteer who guides beings, an unsurpassed being, a teacher of gods and humans, a blessed buddha known as Splendorous King of Shining Light. His world will be known as Painted with
Many Jewels. He will have an immeasurable saṅgha of hearers. He will have a lifespan of ninety-six trillion eons. The appearance of his sacred Dharma will remain for seven million five hundred thousand years.’

“Noble son, at that time, when the prophecy concerning that bodhisattva great being was made, eighty-four thousand beings gained acceptance that phenomena are unborn. Noble son, should you wonder, question, or have doubts regarding the identity of the thus-gone one of that time, there is no need. Why so? Noble son, it is the thus-gone, worthy, perfect buddha Amitābha who was known at that time as the thus-gone Arisen from Flowers and who taught the Dharma in that world. Noble son, should you wonder, question, or have doubts regarding the identity of the prince known as Ratnākara at that time, there is no need. Why so? Noble son, it is the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara who was at that time the son of King Attainment of Victory. That thus-gone one prophesied, ‘He will gain awakening from me.’”

The bodhisattva great being Delighted by Victory, who was among the retinue, now joined his palms and asked the Blessed One, “Blessed One, will beings who have not produced roots of virtue ever even hear this Dharma teaching, [F.46.a] let alone commit it to writing, commission it to be written, retain it, recite it, or offer flowers, incense, and incense powder to it?”

The Blessed One replied to the bodhisattva great being Delighted by Victory, “Noble son, only those who have served as many buddhas as there are grains of sand in the Ganges River will come across this discourse. Noble son, those sentient beings who hear this Dharma teaching and do not doubt it will be reborn in the realm of Sukhāvatī after they die and pass from this world. Noble son, any place where this discourse is kept will become worthy of homage. Noble son, later, in the future, any woman who holds or reads aloud this Dharma teaching will exchange her female body and be reborn in the realm of Sukhāvatī. That will be her last birth as a female. She will, moreover, behold the thus-gone Amitābha at the moment of death.”

Once the Blessed One had spoken, the bodhisattva great being Delighted by Victory, the other bodhisattvas, the monks, and the rest of the assembly, along with the world with its gods, humans, demigods, and gandharvas, all rejoiced and praised what the Blessed One had said.

This concludes the noble Great Vehicle sūtra “Distinguishing Phenomena and What Is Meaningful.”

COLOPHON
Translated, edited, and finalized by the Indian scholars Jinamitra and Dānaśila, as well as by the chief editor and translator, the venerable Yeshé Dé.
The Sanskrit name for this world is most likely *puṣpākara*. This is attested in Negi for *me tog gi ’byung gnas* and it is found in Edgerton (1998, p. 350) as the name of a buddha. We have not, however, found a world by this name, i.e., a *puṣpākaraloka*, and have therefore rendered this name in English translation.

Although canonical sources list past buddhas known either as *puṣpa, puṣpita*, or *puṣpakṛta*, we have not found an attested Sanskrit for the Tibetan *me tog las byung ba*. We have therefore preferred to use the English translation of this name, rather than attempt a reconstruction, especially because clear lists and equivalents for such names of buddhas as these do not as yet seem to be available. For a discussion of the names of buddhas listed in the *Bhadralpikā-sūtra*, see Skilling (2010) and, in particular, Skilling (2014).

For a discussion of these four errors, see Lang (2003).

See Lang (1986).

This notion that women might be obliged to turn into or be reborn as men in order to awaken to buddhahood, somewhat jarring to modern sensibilities, is a common idea found throughout Mahāyāna literature. For more on this theme, see Nattier (2002). Statements of this kind are partially counterbalanced by passages in other sūtras in which the role of gender is downplayed or deconstructed.

In translating *don* as “what is meaningful,” we have taken as one of the only available cues the single occurrence of the word in the text—in the third line of 1.15. Although the translation of this line renders *chos* as “the Dharma” rather than as “phenomena,” the play between the different meanings of this word in this and the following stanza in the source text, and the possible ambiguities that result, are probably intentional.

In the Denkarma catalogue, which is usually thought to date to c. 812 CE, the sūtra is included (F.299.b.3) among the “Miscellaneous Sūtras” (*mdo sde sna tshogs*) less than one hundred ślokas in length, but the order of the words in the
title is inverted to *don dang chos rnam par 'byed pa* (“Distinguishing What is Meaningful and Phenomena”). See also Herrmann-Pfandt 2008, p. 111, no. 208. In the Phangthangma catalogue, the title is the same as in all Kangyurs.

Tibetan: *tshig rab*.

Translated based on the Stok Palace Kangyur: *sdug pa*. The Degé Kangyur reads: *sdud pa*.

Translated based on the Yongle, Lithang, Kangxi, Narthang, Choné, Lhasa, and Stok Palace Kangyurs: *sangs rgyas dang chos*. The Degé Kangyur reads: *sangs rgyas pa'i chos*.

The Tibetan for this bodhisattva’s name is *mi pham dbang phyug*. *mi pham* translates the Sanskrit *ajita*, which is an epithet typically associated with Maitreya. It is therefore possible that the bodhisattva mentioned here could be the well-known Maitreya.

See note 5.
b. BIBLIOGRAPHY


‘phags pa chos dang don rnam par ‘byed pa ces bya ba thegs pa chen po’i mdo. Stok no. 116, stog pho brang bris ma, vol. 64 (mdo sde, pa), folios 349.a–354.b.


GLOSSARY

g.1 Acceptance that phenomena are unborn

mi skye ba’i chos la bzod pa

The realization that all phenomena are beyond birth.

Amitābha

Amitābha

The buddha residing in the western buddha realm Sukhāvatti.

Anāthapiṇḍada

Anāthapiṇḍada

An important benefactor of Buddha Śakyamuni.

Arisen from Flowers

A former buddha, who presently is Buddha Amitābha.

Attainment of Victory

The ruler of the world Flower Origin.

Avalokiteśvara

One of the main bodhisattva disciples of Buddha Śakyamuni, praised for his compassion.
An Indian pandita who was resident in Tibet during the late eighth and early ninth centuries.

The bodhisattva to whom this sūtra is spoken.

The traditional adversaries of the devas (gods) who are frequently portrayed in the Brahmanical mythology as having a disruptive effect on cosmological and social harmony.

The constituents of a human being: form, feeling, perception, formation, and consciousness.

The buddha realm of the Buddha Arisen from Flowers.

Taking what is impermanent to be permanent, what is painful to be delightful, what is unclean to be clean, and what is no self to be a self.

Lower class of divine being, under the control of the Guardian King of the East. Capable of flight, they are often described as "celestial musicians."

"celestial musicians."
Lower class of divine being, described as an eagle-type bird with a gigantic wing span. They were traditionally enemies of the nāgas. In the Vedas, they were thought to have brought nectar from the heavens to earth.

**Invincible Lord**

mi phan dbang phyug

A bodhisattva in the assembly of the buddha Arisen from Flowers.

**Jeta Grove**

rgyal bu rgyal byed kyi tshal

Jetavana

The park donated to the Buddha by Anāthapiṇḍada.

**Jinamitra**

dzi na mi tra

Jinamitra

An Indian Kashmiri pandita who was resident in Tibet during the late eighth and early ninth centuries. He worked with several Tibetan translators on the translation of a number of sūtras.

**Kiṃnara**

mi'am ci

kiṃnara

A class of semidivine beings that resemble humans to the degree that their very name—which means "Is that a man?"—suggests some confusion as to their divine status.

**Mahoraga**

lto 'phye chen po

mahoraga

A class of serpentine non-human beings.

**Nāga**

klu

nāga

A semidivine class of beings who live in subterranean aquatic environments and who are known to hoard wealth and esoteric teachings. They are associated with snakes and serpents.

**Painted with Many Jewels**

kun nas rin po ches yang dag par bris pa

The buddha realm in which Prince Ratnākara will attain awakening.

**Parinirvāṇa**

yongs su mta ma yan las 'das pa
parinirvāṇa
The final stage of passing into nirvāṇa, which occurs when a worthy one or a buddha passes away.

Ratnākara
The son of King Attainment of Victory.

Ratnaśrī
The queen of King Attainment of Victory.

Śākyamuni
The buddha of this age; the historical buddha.

Splendorous King of Shining Light
The name of Prince Ratnākara once he attains awakening.

Śrāvastī
The capital of the ancient Kosala kingdom in India during the sixth–fifth centuries BCE.

Sukhāvatī
The buddha realm, located in the western direction, in which Buddha Amitābha resides.

Trichiliocosm
A universe containing one billion worlds.

Yakṣa
A class of beings belonging to the realm of Kubera, the god of wealth.

Yeshé Dé
ye shes sde
A prolific Tibetan translator active during the late eighth and early ninth centuries.